Soldiers Online

OPBAT Soldiers

Story and Photos by Steve Harding

THE Black Hawk is in a tight right-hand turn at 300 feet, revealing every detail of the small island below to the two men in the back of the helicopter. One is a U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agent, the other is a member of the Royal Bahamas Police Force. Both are looking for the same thing — any sign of the drug smugglers that they, and the UH-60's Army crew, are tasked with stopping.

Once it's clear that the coral outcropping is deserted, the UH-60 levels out and heads toward the next in a string of small islands that stretches northwest toward the horizon. The late-afternoon view is idyllic — the aquamarine water is dotted with sailboats and the coming sunset tinges the sky ahead with shades of red and gold. But when night falls the area will become the scene of an ongoing maritime cat-and-mouse game pitting smugglers against the people and aircraft of OPBAT, a multinational, multiservice counterdrug effort in which the Army plays a vital role.

Origins of a Drug War

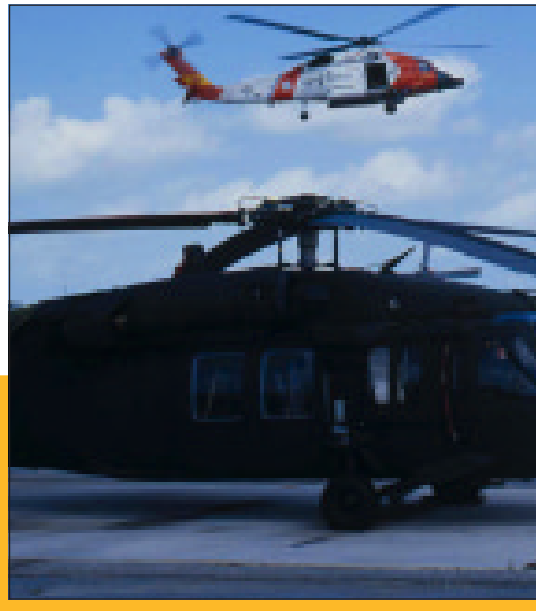
The 700 islands that dot the Atlantic Ocean from just east of Florida to just north of Haiti have historically been a convenient area of operations for pirates, smugglers and other seaborne brigands. The South American drug cartels that sprang up in the 1970s quickly realized the strategic value of the sparsely populated region, and the islands soon became a vital transshipment point for cocaine and marijuana bound for the United States.

The police forces of the Bahamas and the British-administered Turks and Caicos islands were ill-equipped to locate and stop the smugglers' aircraft and small boats. OPBAT — Operation Bahamas, Turks and Caicos — thus began in 1982 as a joint U.S., Bahamian and British effort to interdict the flow of illegal drugs into and through the 100,000-square-mile area, while at the same time assisting the islands' police and military forces in drug-control operations.

Given the vast area that had to be patrolled and the few runways capable of supporting fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters were an early addition to the OPBAT arsenal. Though aviation support was initially provided by the Air Force, it eventually became a Coast Guard responsibility. That service retains tactical control of OPBAT's aviation operations, which the Army joined in 1986.

Organized for Success

OPBAT is a DEA-run operation and Tom Hill, the agency's counternarcotics attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Nassau, has overall responsibility for the mission. As



Though OPBAT's Army Black Hawks and Coast Guard Jayhawks are similar in appearance, each has different strengths.

Soldiers play a major role in Operation Bahamas, Turks and Caicos, a DEA-run effort to interdict the flow of illegal drugs into and through a 100,000-square-mile area dotted with 700 islands.

During a routine patrol SPC William C. Hatch, a UH-60 crew chief, looks for anything out of the ordinary on one of the Bahamas' 700 islands.

One of the most challenging aspects of OPBAT operations, pilots agree, is the need for long periods of overwater flight while wearing night-vision goggles.

Counterdrug operations of OPBAT

director of OPBAT's embassy operations center, Coast Guard Cmdr. Bryan Seale is in charge of the military assets, and 1LT Marc Werner is the embassy-based Army liaison officer.

There are three OPBAT operating sites — one in Nassau, on New Providence Island; one about 125 miles to the southeast on Great Exuma Island; and one a further 250 miles out on Great Inagua Island. The Nassau and Great Inagua sites each have two Coast Guard HH-60 Jayhawk helicopters, while Great Exuma hosts three Army UH-60L Black Hawks. The DEA also has aircraft based in the Bahamas — a fixed wing airplane and a Bell 412 helicopter — that are dedicated primarily to logistical support.

"Each OPBAT site is maintained and operated by the appropriate

Living in the Bahamas

SOLDIERS assigned to the Army's OPBAT detachment readily admit that living in the Bahamas has obvious benefits — sun, sand and ocean — and that the quality of life is good.

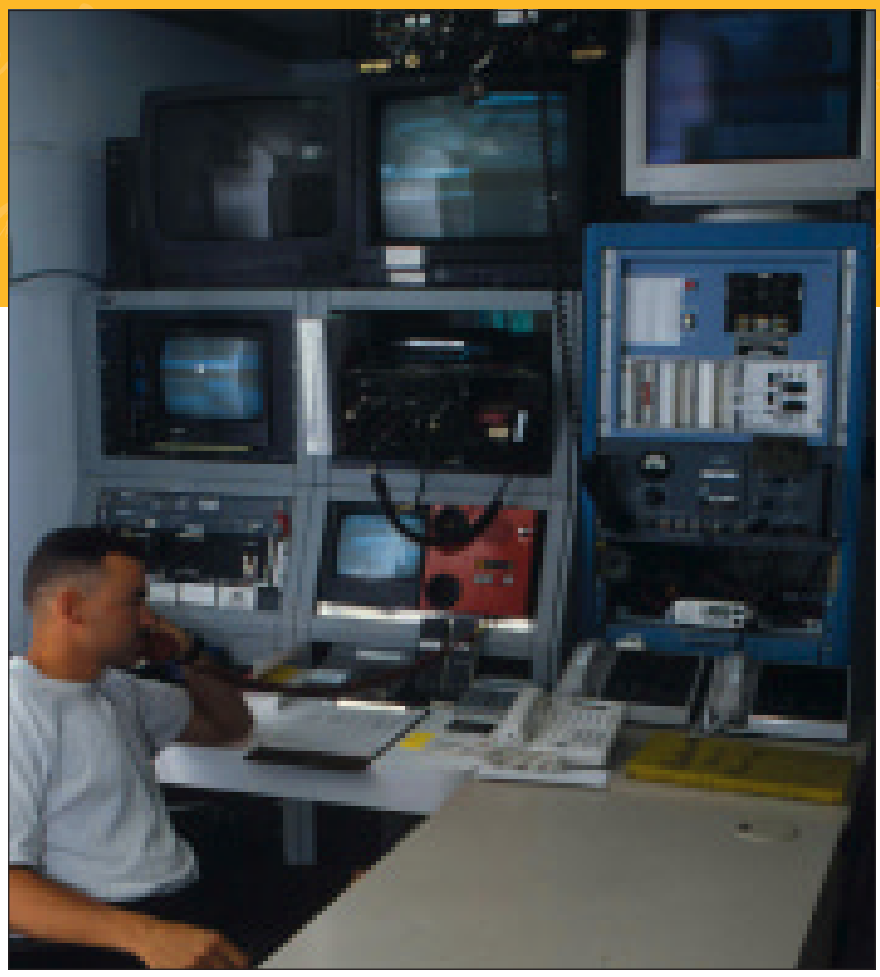
"There's nowhere else the Army's going to send me where I'll get to see such blue water and such beautiful skies," said SGT Lori Lee Anstey, the detachment's flight operations specialist. "And the reality is that we live in a part of the world that other people pay thousands of dollars just to visit for a few days."

Other than 1LT Marc Werner, who

service," Seale said, "though we work together closely. The Army and Coast Guard personnel get along very well — there is constant communication and cooperation — and their aircraft stage through each other's operating bases whenever necessary."

The military aircraft are tasked with two main missions, Hill said. The first is to conduct aerial patrols to gather intelligence about drug-smuggling operations, and the second is to locate and intercept specific aircraft and boats engaged in smuggling.

"Every time an OPBAT helicopter goes out on a law-enforcement mission — whether it's a routine patrol or



The operations center at the Great Exuma airfield allows the Army aviators to remain in constant touch with each other, and with all the other OPBAT agencies.

lives and works in Nassau, all of the soldiers assigned to OPBAT live in leased housing not far from the detachment's small airfield on Great Exuma. The apartment-style units each have one or two bedrooms, a kitchen and a living room, and in most cases are shared by two people. There is also a communal dayroom and a one-room medical clinic.

The housing complex sits on a small bay and has its own pier, which is home to a motorboat and two Sea-doos used for both mission-related training and for the soldiers' off-duty use. Great Exuma boasts several excellent beaches, great fishing and excellent snorkeling, and a pace of life generally more relaxed than that found on other, more populous islands in the Bahamas.

Unfortunately, the same relative isolation that makes Great Exuma such a wonderful vacation spot can make it something less than an exciting place to live full time, soldiers said.

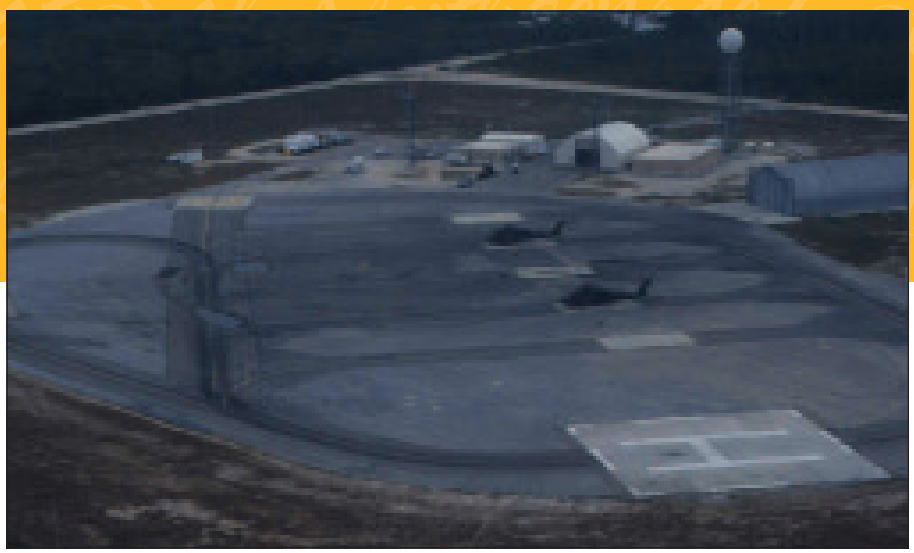
"The recreation possibilities are great," said SPC William C. Hatch, a UH-60 crew chief, "but once you've eaten in the two or three restaurants and visited the handful of shops in George Town, you've just about exhausted the island's nightlife options."

"Most people hear the word 'Bahamas' and they have the illusion that it couldn't be any better, but it can get old," said 1LT Mariclare Kenney, a pilot. "If the weather's bad, there is really nothing to do other than work. We can't complain, though, because it's obviously much better than where most other soldiers are. But it's also not the tropical paradise that most people imagine."

Anstey feels that how well soldiers adapt to life on the island depends on how much they apply themselves to what they want to do.

"You can get in shape, you can work on correspondence and online courses, or you can just veg out and watch videos," she said. "You can pretty much apply yourself to anything you want to do.

"We all agree that there are drawbacks to living on a small island," Anstey added, "but the bottom line is that the quality of life here is a lot better than it could be. Where else is the Army going to give you two jet skis and a boat and fishing equipment and say: 'In your off time, have some fun.' And the best part is you actually get to know the people you work with. It really doesn't get much better." — *Steve Harding*



One of three OPBAT operating sites, the Great Exuma airfield is home to three UH-60Ls and all but one of the soldiers assigned to the joint counterdrug effort.

responding to a target — it carries a law-enforcement team," Hill said. That team consists of a host-nation police officer — either Bahamian or Turks and Caicos — and a DEA agent.

Elusive Targets

"Though the helicopters occasionally intercept aircraft that are either attempting to drop drugs to waiting vessels or land on deserted islands," Hill said, "the small, high-speed boats — which we call 'go-fasts' — are the primary threat right now."

Ranging from 28 to 40 feet long and fitted with three or four 200- to 250-horsepower engines, the boats are very light and very fast, Hill said. They can carry from a few hundred pounds to more than 5,000 pounds of Colombian cocaine or Jamaican-grown marijuana, and the tactics employed by the go-fasts' crews can make them extremely difficult to intercept.

"Most come out of Jamaica and head northeast into the Windward Passage between Cuba and Haiti, then turn northwest," Hill said. "The smugglers hug the Cuban coast, knowing that American aircraft will not violate the island nation's sovereignty and that Cuba's poorly equipped border guards have little hope of catching them."

About halfway up Cuba's northern coast the smugglers turn their boats north and race into Bahamian territory, hoping to make landfall unobserved. The OPBAT helicopters "give us the ability to locate, track and stop the go-fasts," Hill said.

Choosing the Asset

When the OPBAT control center gets word of an incoming go-fast boat or a suspicious aircraft, Seale and the DEA's embassy-based group supervisor confer on the best way to use the Army and Coast Guard aircraft to interdict the target.

"The DEA group supervisor looks at it from the 'how do we stop this boat or aircraft?' point of view, while I'm focused on making the best use of our available assets," Seale said. "I'm tasked with being the expert on all the aviation-related rules and regulations, and on how best to employ our aircraft to achieve the DEA's interdiction goal.'

Seale must take into account such specifically aviation-related concerns as aircraft range, maximum fuel load, crew-rest requirements and other limitations. He's aided in these determinations by Werner, a rated UH-60 pilot who spent two months flying operational missions out of the Great Exuma facility before taking up his liaison post at the embassy.

"There are important differences between Army and Coast Guard

An Army technician *(at right)* helps the crew of a Coast Guard HH-60 troubleshoot an avionics problem. Cooperation between the two services is close and effective.

Light, powerful and difficult to intercept, "go-fast" boats like this one can carry significant loads of cocaine or marijuana. DEA photo

aviation operations," Werner said. "For example, we have different policies that determine how many hours a pilot is allowed to fly within a certain period of time. The Coast Guard's tend to be more lenient because of the type of flying its pilots normally do, while the Army's more restrictive policy takes into account things like nap-of-the earth flight. And those policies are the same whether we're flying in the Bahamas or Bosnia."

Seale, an aviator himself, said that each service brings a unique set of skills to the mission. The Coast Guard crews, for example, are very experienced in long-distance overwater flying, especially in bad weather. The Army aviators, on the other hand, have extensive experience in low-level tactical flying and the use of night-vision goggles.

"Could we do this job with three Coast Guard units? Absolutely. Could it be done with three Army units? Certainly. Are we better off having the mix of Army and Coast Guard capabilities? Yes, there's no doubt that we are, because each service brings real strengths into the mix," Seale said.

The decision whether to use Army or Coast Guard aircraft for a particular mission is made, Seale said, based on two factors.

The first is location — the aircraft that is closer is more likely to get the mission. This ensures more economical use of the aircraft and crew, as well as ensuring that the aircraft arrives on-scene sooner.

The second consideration is the helicopters' different capabilities. Just as the crews of each service have differing skills, their aircraft have different strengths. Though the UH-60s and HH-60s are generally similar in appearance, they differ in significant ways. The Black Hawk, for example, can carry more people than the Jayhawk, so if a particular mission requires the transportation of a large number of people, the UH-60 will probably fly that mission.

OPBAT Soldiers

Once the decision is made about which aircraft will launch on a particular mission, the order goes out to the appropriate operating site. For the Army, that means Great Exuma.

Given the vast area to be patrolled and the shortage of runways for fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters are a vital part of OPBAT's arsenal.

A DEA agent *(left)* and a Bahamian police officer scan the sea for suspicious vessels. Similar two-person teams are aboard all OPBAT helicopters flying law-enforcement missions.

A small facility a few miles outside George Town, the Army's OPBAT site is home to three UH-60L helicopters and a detachment of about 25 soldiers drawn from the, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Aviation Regiment, home-based at Hunter Army Air Field, Ga. The soldiers are assigned to OPBAT for rotations averaging two to three months. Many have served in the Bahamas several times, and each brings particular skills to the detachment.

"We're a microcosm of a battalion here," said CPT Richard Debany, commander of both Company A, 2nd Bn., 3rd Avn., and of the OPBAT detachment. "I've got the whole range of job skills — pilots, crew chiefs, shops people, technical inspectors, communications, petroleum and operations specialists, and a medic. Most come from 2/3 Avn., but we sometimes draw people from other units. We all form a cohesive team."

And that team's goal — to help stop smugglers — requires a constant effort by every member of the detachment.

"This is an intense mission," said 1LT Mariclare Kenney, a detachment pilot. "It's 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It doesn't make any difference whether it's Christmas or Thanksgiving or whatever, if a mission comes up, we go. Everybody works very hard.

"And the high operational tempo ensures that crews log a lot of flight time very quickly," Kenney said. "For example, in 10 weeks here I've built up close to 100 hours, whereas back in Savannah it would take me well over a year to log that much time."

Flying the Mission

Given the nature of the OPBAT mission and the operational conditions in the Bahamas, the flight hours the aviators log can be tough ones.

"We not only intercept and track aircraft and go-fasts," Debany said, "we put law-enforcement personnel on the ground to make arrests, and we transport prisoners and confiscated drugs. We obviously do a lot of overwater flying and land on a lot of very small coral outcroppings that aren't much larger than the helicopter. And much of the flying we do is done while wearing night-vision goggles."

"The most challenging thing about overwater flying here is doing it while wearing NVGs," Kenney said. "It's great when you have good moon illumination, because you can see for miles — it's almost like flying during the day. But when there is little or no moon illumination, it's very hard to tell where the sky ends and the water begins."

The secret to success under such challenging conditions, said detachment pilot CW2 Trina Sorrell, is excellent crew coordination.

"Everyone really has to work together," she said. "During a boat chase, for example, one pilot concentrates on flying the aircraft and staying with the boat, and the other works all the radios and does all the coordination with the other players. And the crew chief calls out the radar altimeter altitude and keeps track of the fuel transfers. It's all about teamwork, and about accomplishing the mission."

A Job Well Done

The effort OPBAT soldiers put into accomplishing the mission is obviously appreciated by the other agencies and individuals involved in the ongoing counternarcotics operation.

"These soldiers are really making an important contribution down here," Hill said. "And I don't think people

"This can be a challenging environment, and when these soldiers are chasing a go-fast or trying to break up the airdrop of drugs, they are on the front line. And we in DEA are very glad to have them down here."

Corrosion is a constant threat during overwater operations, and the UH-60s go through a post-flight "bird bath" to wash off accumulated salt.

realize how dangerous a mission it can be. There are long flights, over water, in low-light conditions. This can be a challenging environment, and when these soldiers are chasing a go-fast or trying to break up the airdrop of drugs, they are on the front line. And we in DEA are very glad to have them down here."

"We couldn't accomplish what we do if the Army wasn't here," Seale added. "Look at a map of this region, and you'll see that the Army's operating base on Great Exuma is probably the most strategically important base OPBAT has. Combine that with the soldiers' unique set of skills and their intense motivation, and it makes them absolutely and unequivocally essential to OPBAT's success."

For their part, the OPBAT soldiers take obvious pride in the role they play in the fight against illegal drugs.

"Everybody in this detachment knows that we're part of an important, real-world mission," Debany said. "We're focused on one purpose — having an aircraft ready to accomplish the mission 24 hours a day, seven days a week, every week of the year.

"And though most people probably aren't even aware that there is an Army aviation unit in the Bahamas," he added, "it's nice to be able to look at the monthly statistics — of boats intercepted and drugs confiscated — and say to yourself, 'Well, that's what we did this month, and we did it safely.' It's a source of pride for us, and I think it should be a source of pride for the Army." □

DEA photo

Since 1982 OPBAT has interdicted tons of marijuana and cocaine that otherwise would have reached the United States.